

Central Lutheran Church
Listen to Jesus
February 15, 2026
Matthew 17:1-9

Mountaintop moments are few and far between. Whenever and wherever they occur, they are life changing.

Devoted athletes train for years with the aspiration of becoming the best of the best in their sport.

Last weekend 125 million Americans watched 96 men compete in the Super Bowl.¹ At the end of the evening, the Seattle Seahawks players had a mountaintop moment. For a professional football player, nothing compares to winning the Super Bowl.

This week more than 25 million Americans have watched the Winter Olympics each day.² The television presentation of the games seeks to humanize the participants, helping us to get to know them. So far – at least as of yesterday afternoon – only 5 Americans have ascended the podium to receive gold medals. For Olympic athletes, this is the highest mountaintop.

Since most of us are not and don't aspire to become world renowned athletes, it is important to remember that mountaintop moments are not limited to sports.

On this Valentine's Day weekend, many remember their own love stories. Stories of romantic love that grew over time culminating in a mountaintop experience of being united in marriage.

For others, your most memorable mountaintop moments came at the height of professional achievement, with the birth of a child or grandchild, or through a religious experience.

Today our mountaintop story is an incredible one-of-a-kind experience church folk call the Transfiguration.

¹ Super Bowl LX Delivers 124.9 Million Viewers, available from <https://www.nielsen.com/news-center/2026/super-bowl-lx-delivers-124-9-million-viewers/>

² NBC sees 93% Winter Olympics ratings spike through first 5 days, available from <https://www.reuters.com/sports/nbc-sees-93-winter-olympics-ratings-spike-through-first-5-days--flm-2026-02-12/>

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain, and before their eyes something happens that stretches the limits of description.

Jesus' face shines like the sun. His clothes become radiant. Moses and Elijah appear and speak with him.

A bright cloud overshadows them. And from that cloud comes a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him."³

Listen to him.

- Don't merely admire him from a distance.
- Don't simply add his teachings to your playlist.
- Don't think that following will come without a cost.

Listen to him. Listen to Jesus.

That command echoes something we heard not long ago. The last time I was with you – one month ago – we witnessed Jesus' baptism.⁴ When he came up out of the baptismal waters, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended like a dove, and a voice proclaimed: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."⁵

At the river, God's voice revealed Jesus' identity, alerting us before his public ministry began.

Now, on the mountain, this voice returns to provide direction. Today's message is clear: since you know who Jesus is, you should pay attention – really listen – to all that he says.

But, in Matthew's gospel, what Jesus has just said is not easy. He has been teaching about sacrifice, about losing life to find it, about taking up the cross. These are not happy messages designed to comfort us.

³ Matthew 17:5, NRSV.

⁴ Greg Smith. "Will You Be a Witness?," available from <https://sowhatfaith.com/2026/01/11/will-you-be-a-witness/>

⁵ Matthew 3:17, NRSV.

When Peter sees Jesus' shining, he cannot look away. He wants this experience to continue. He tries to memorialize it, even offering to build dwellings as a way to preserve the experience.

We understand that instinct. We want faith to be luminous and uncomplicated. We want to linger where God feels unmistakably present. We want it all.

But the story does not allow that. Fear falls upon the disciples. Jesus reaches out, touches them, and says, "Get up and do not be afraid."⁶ And then they descend the mountain together, heading back toward the crowds, the needs, the tensions, the everyday realities, and ultimately the road to Jerusalem.

The mountaintop is real. It isn't an escape; it is preparation.

And perhaps that is why this story comes at this point in the church year, preparing us for Lent. We receive a vision of light before we enter the wilderness. We see Christ's radiance before being marked by ashes.

It reminds me of the song we sung earlier in this service: Shine, Jesus, Shine. The lyrics showcase Christ's light flooding our lives, blazing through darkness, setting hearts on fire. And they emphasize Jesus shining directly on each of us.

Importantly, in both the hymn and the gospel, the light does not exist for spectacle. The light illuminates, transforms, and sends us back into the world. Because listening to Jesus matters not only on mountaintops but every day, especially in difficult times.

We live in a moment when many voices are speaking loudly in our nation. Their messages are constant and there calls to action are urgent. Some even use religious language or claim Jesus' authority. Yet not all of these pleas reflect the heart of Jesus.

This makes the command from the cloud particularly relevant right now, "Listen to him."

⁶ Matthew 19:7, NRSV.

Listen for the voice that

- lifts the vulnerable rather than dismissing them,
- calls us to love neighbors rather than fear them,
- builds up all people rather than tearing them down.

Listening deeply is spiritual work. It requires more of us than simply to listen to the loudest voices or to retreat into safe echo chambers. It demands that we know the authentic voice of the Beloved Son and compare all other voices to his voice.

Listening to Jesus is something Central is already practicing. It is an important part of this community's shared experience. It has guided you in years past during seasons of growth, stability, and decline. It is guiding you now during a season of transition, reflection, and possibility.

We serve a Still Speaking God. And we become better listeners when we

- spend time in Scripture and in prayer,
- gather for worship and for service,
- practice tuning out background noise.

As we do these things, Jesus' voice becomes clearer and clearer.

Now, as we prepare for the Lenten journey, we commit to learn together to be better listeners to the one who

- was named Beloved at the river and on the mountain,
- came to seek and to serve even at great personal cost,
- invites those who follow in his Way to live lives of love.

Mountaintop moments are short-term experiences that enable long-term transformation. Circling back to the where we began it becomes clear that the awards ceremonies for the Super Bowl or Olympics are measured in minutes, most weddings – including receptions – are over in a few hours, and newborns soon become infants and infants quickly become toddlers. Their impact, however, is just beginning.

Today is a big day. We are on the mountaintop. Jesus is shining. But, we must soon come down from this high place to experience its full impact.

As we make our way down the mountain, we do so well aware that we will return to this sacred space in just a few days to receive ashes as a reminder of our mortality. That experience will be followed by an entire season of reflection and repentance.

Maybe this year, when you think about something to give up or something to take on for Lent, you might choose something as simple, and as hard, as listening to Jesus.

As we prepare to walk into Lent, we do so remembering what we've seen and heard, trusting that Christ's light goes with us. It will accompany us wherever we go, even through the wilderness.

May we be a people who continue to listen, trusting that the voice still echoes: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

Amen.